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ABSTRACT

After summarizing the current literature regarding potential school crganizational structures and practices, this report outlined the process that was developed and utilized by four small rural school districts in southern Minnesota in 1980. Emphasis was on maintaining local schcol districts which cooperated with other schools through an interactive committee structure. The initial prcgramming focused on providing a comprehensive high school program and special education programs for both elementary and secondary level students. Data indicated that the process of reviewing the experiences and suggestions of others aided the four model school districts in adapting ideas from others into their own plan. Besides enabling the districts to retain some aspects of local school traditions and identity, the plan alsc provided improved educational opportunities for their high school age students. In addition, the districts were better able to study effectively the costs and problems involved in providing comprehensive educational programs. (CM)

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THE SURVIVAL OF SMALL AND RURAL SCHOOLS: CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES

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This paper eminated out of the frustrations and pressures small and rural schools are experiencing. First a need existed to find means to retain local schools for community identity, local educational and social development of elementary and secondary school age youngsters. Secondly, the current competing pressures of declining enrollment, inflation and increased costs of education provoked the need to examine measures to increase economic efficiency.

This paper reviews proposals found in the current literature regarding potential school organizational structures and practices. In addition, a proposed organizational structure was developed from the literature and put into practice. The proposed structure emphasized continuing local school districts with cooperation with other schools through an interactive committee structure. This committee structure emphasized problem solving and cooperation between four school districts to enhance educational programming. Initially, the programming focused on providing a comprehensive high school program and special education offerings for both elementary and secondary age students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature conveys a variety of concepts, including cooperation, consolidation, RESA and pairing. The first concept interorganizational cooperation, has been reviewed from two basic perspectives over the past decade. Exchange and power-dependency models appear to be the most frequently utilized approaches to describe interorganizational relations. Levine and White (1961) stated that organizational exchange is characterized as any voluntary activity between two organizations for the realization of their respective goals or objectives. Under conditions of scarcity, interorganizational exchanges of such elements as clients, labor services, and resources other than labor services are essential to goal attainment. Levine and White emphasized that inter-organizational cooperation is contigent upon three related factors: (1) the accessibility of each organization to necessary elements from outside the system, (2) the objectives of the organization and particular functions to which it allocates the elements it controls, and (3) the degree to which domain consensus

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exists among the various organizations. It has been suggested that this type of relationship is most common in periods of scarce or declining resources. Further, the exchange approach implies that the nature of the interaction is characterized by a high degree of cooperation and problem solving.

Geutzkow (1966), Aldrich (1976) and others have explored a power-dependency approach to interorganizational relations. In this model the motivation for interaction was seen as asymmetrical. The leadership of one organization is motivated to interact, while the other is reluctant. External pressure or power is applied to induce the reluctant organization into the relationship. Power extension is a functional requirement of the model. Bargaining and conflict are the typical modes of interaction as each organization seeks to attain its own goals at the expense of the other.

Benson (1975) proposed a power-dependency approach where he related the political-economic substructure to interorganizational relations. He suggested that organizations seek an adequate supply of money and authority to fulfill program needs, maintain their domain, ensure their flow of resources, and defend their mode of service. These organizational resources are acquired from the political economy as well as other organizations. Benson further suggested that when relationships among organizations were in balance, there would be domain consensus, ideological consensus, positive evaluations of other organizations, and work coordination among them. These equilibrium components are limited, however, by their dependence upon the broader political economy.

Schmidt and Kochan (1977) combined the exchange and power-dependency approaches into a single framework. Their analysis revealed that both types of relationships can exist within the same interorganizational field. Their study integrates these two approaches to explain variations in the frequency of interaction and the nature of interactions between pairs of organizations. The results suggest that interorganizational relationships are mixed-motive situations in which each organization behaves in accordance with its own self-interest.

Hall et al (1977) explored the patterns of interorganizational relationships as they occur under different conditions; depending whether they are mandated by law, based on formal agreement, or were voluntary. They found that the study supported the exchange perspective when the basis of interaction was voluntary.

When interaction was by formal agreement or legal mandate, power issues, organizational objectives, and resource issues were apparently resolved at the outset and therefore exchange theory was not as useful. What is suggested to be operating in a mandated or formal agreement is division of labor interdependencies based upon the sequence of tasks to be performed.

Molnar (1978) examined the comparative properties of interacting organizations as determinants of the nature of relations between them. Properties of organizational domain in terms of the activity areas, services, and clients to be shared were found to be important sets of variables for explaining interdependence. The findings demonstrated that the selected comparative properties accounted for nearly a third of the variance of the three measures of interdependence used in the study.

In an article discussing community education, Ginn and Rush (1978) review important aspects of promoting interagency cooperation, community problem solving, and coordinated resource allocation. Four steps were proposed by Ginn and Rush; they are:

1. Examination of community compenents; particularly human, physical, and institutional resources in the community.
2. Clarification of objectives, a result of study of all components of community cooperating to formulate compatible objectives.
3. Accumulation of research data gathered from every aspect of community.
4. Application of ethical principles.

A review of regionalism and cooperation in public education was conducted. Achilles, Hughes, and Leonard (1974) examined the continuing trend toward Regional Educational Service Agencies or RESA. While dispelling some myths and false hopes, they discussed major roles and possibilities for local constituent districts. In the October/November issue of Appalachia Robert M. Isenberg, former associate executive secretary of A.A.S.A., listed the types of programs which can be offered by RESAs than by individual school districts.

1. Programs which require a large pupil population base for effective and economical operation because of low incidence rates (e.g. special education program).
2. Programs which require a large pupil base for effective and economical operation because of high equipment of personnel costs. (e.g. data processing, curriculum specialists).
3. Programs which require a larger area in order to get an appropriate social and economic mix.

4. Programs which by nature must be regional (e.g. regional planning basis).
5. Programs which might be considered of an experimental, pilot, or demonstration nature.

The difficulties of the adversary relationship that seems to exist between state education agencies and voluntary Regional Educational Service Agencies are discussed by Achilles and Gentry (1977) in a later article. The article reviews the factors which have contributed to this counter productive relationship, included are: (1) the structural positions of both organizations within the state's educational system, (2) the tasks and roles of the organizations, (3) tradition, and (4) the type of person professionally attracted to each organization.

Representative of the literature on school district reorganization and consolidation is the recent dialogue between Elseroad (1977) and Sher (1977). Elseroad historically tracks the consolidation movement from 127,000 school districts nationally in 1932 to 17,000 districts in the nation in 1972. While he acknowledges growing public antipathy to government and bureaucracy, the community control movement, and renewed appreciation of the values of small-town rural life style, he concludes that continued consolidation is unavoidable. In Elseroad's view consolidation would be the result of the implementation of four enduring goals that citizens hold for the schools. He believes larger systems bring: (1) better academic instruction, (2) extended scope of educational opportunity, (3) equity and justice in the tax burden, and (4) great economic efficiency. Sher articulates the opposite view and vigorously attacks Elseroad's "bigger is better" notions as a dogmatic position that ignores relevant research. An analysis of research by Sher and Tompkins (1976) makes the case that the technical information used to justify consolidation was severealy flawed and unreliable. Additionally, Sher (1977) presents six legislative alternatives to school district reorganization that are listed below:

1. Abolish all mandatory consolidation or reorganization legislation.
2. Eliminate all direct and indirect incentives to consolidate or reorganize.
3. Establish a program of technical assistance to small rural schools and school districts.
4. Create a "remote, but necessary" classification system for small rural schools and school districts.

5. Ensure that consolidated schools and districts are accountable to their small rural members.
6. Alternatives to consolidation and reorganization should be encouraged and developed.

Alternatives in coping with the problems related to declining enrollment in rural school districts were explored in a study undertaken in 1976 by a special committee appointed by the Iowa Association of School Boards. Over a two year period the 18 member committee examined enrollment, finance, curriculum, facilities, faculty, mergers, and other appropriate matters. In four two-day meetings the group heard from a wide variety of witnesses, including State Legislators, School Administrators, University experts, School Boaard Members, and State Officials. A number of strengths as well as hazards were identified. Small districts, (below 800 enrollment) offered certain advantages, including:

1. More opportunity to participate in a variety of activities,
2. More chance to develop leadership skills,
3. Stronger community involvement,
4. A high level of teacher satisfaction,
5. Test scores equal or better to students in larger districts, and
6. More stability in graduates in terms of further education and employment.

They also suggested that merging of small districts may provide a "Grace Period" from the problems of declining enrollment but it will not eliminate them. Problems will intensify for small districts and long range planning should be undertaken for every small district. The present headcount system of funding in Iowa should be modified to compensate fixed costs which persist even as enrollment declines.

In Minnesota several studies have been conducted. The overwhelming sentiment of these studies and legislative options have been to analyze alternatives to consolidation. One action was to enact a "pairing law" - H.F. 427, 1978. This act provides the

> . . . authorizing school districts to discontinue certain grades and provide instruction by contract with other districts. . .

Further, the Minnesota Legislature enacted MS 122.86-122.89 - Educational Planning Task Force. This law was enacted in response to the need to develop long-range plans to deal with the fluctuating enrollments currently in existence in Minnesota school districts. This law provides for local, area, and statewide planning. This law also generates "grass root" evaluation and planning for the provision of education needs.

The arguments of (1) declining/fluctuating enrollments, (2) an increasing need to match efficiency and economy, (3) inflation, and (4) negative public sentiment toward increasing governmental costs compel educators to plan carefully. These needs encouraged the development of a model to facilitate planning among and between small schools. The following discussion outlines the process that was developed and utilized by four small/rural school districts in southern Minnesota in 1980.

Interschool Cooperation Model, January 1980

The discussion below outlines the major components and functions of the proposed Interschool Cooperation Model. This model is an Open System Interactive Proposal.

Steering Committee: Each school district will retain its integrity within its community. Moreover, the ultimate acceptability and success of interschool cooperation resides with each school district board of education.

The Steering Committee for the Interschool Cooperation Model is the screening and review mechanism prior to formal recommendation decisions. This body consists of the Superintendent (1) and two (2) school board members from each of the four (4) school districts. Therefore, the board will normally consist of 12 regular members.

Voting rights were given to the eight school board representatives. The Superintendents participate as advisors and line liaison personnel for each district.

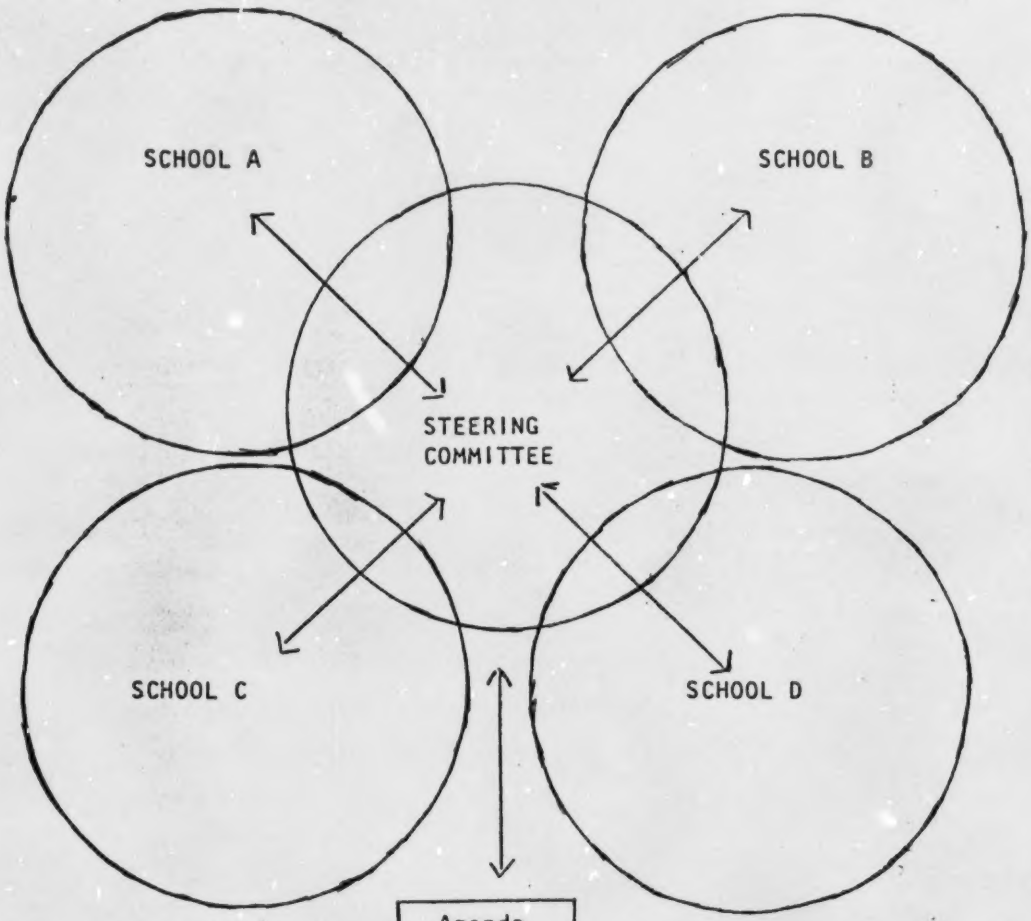
The chairperson of the committee was elected by common ballot from the school board representatives.

A recording secretary was elected by common ballot from the school board representatives.

The agenda for meetings was developed by submitting items to one of the Superintendents who conferred with the Steering Committee chairperson. Upon reaching common agreement with regard to agendas were mailed to each member. The posting of these meetings follow acceptable standards for school boards.

Committees: Four general committees and subcommittees as needed were recommended.

INTERSCHOOL COOPERATION MODEL



Agenda Committee

GEN ADM

- 2 Elem. Prin
- 2 H.S. Prin
- 2 Bd. Mem
- 2 Faculty M.

GEN CURR

- 2 Elem. Prin
- 2 H.S. Prin
- 3 Tch. 1 El, 1 Sec, 1 Sp
- 1 Supt.
- 1 Bd. Mem.

SCHOOL COMM RELATIONS

- 1 Bd. Mem.
- 1 Supt.
- 4 Faculty
- 1 Prin.
- 4 Parents

HS PROGRAM

- 4 Prin.
- 1 Supt.
- 2 Faculty Mem

SUB-COMMITTEE

Transportation

Specialists and other Agencies or Cooperatives

SUB-COMMITTEES FOR ACTIVITIES

- 4 Athletic Directors
- 4 Students
- 4 Principals
- 4 Teachers

The four major committees were:

1. General Administration
2. General Curriculum (K-12 and Special Programs)
3. School community Relations
4. High School (7-12) Programming Sharing

These committees were recommended as problem solving groups. Representation was intended to provide wide participation from persons and personnel representing the various school responsibilities and the four school districts. The intent of each committee was to recommend solutions or alternatives to problems. This recommendation would be reviewed by the Steering committee. Once the Steering Committee could reach a majority opinion this information should be either (1) referred to the committee to re-examine their school boards for consideration or adoption. Matters which were not acceptable to the individual school boards serve to be returned for further study.

It was suggested that each committee elect a chairperson and secretary from the membership. Each committee was encouraged to consider sub-committee membership where needed to solve or investigate problems.

Interschool Model Utilization as of June 1980: Portions of the model evolved naturally through the deisre and needs of the districts to interact. In January of 1980 the writers formulated the more complete model.

The model has been utilized only at the Steering Committee level. They, the Steering Committee, have requested studies and analysis to be conducted by the four High School Principals, the Superintendents the consultant and they also have requested information other specialists on research, negotiations and legal counsel.

Thus far, the model has been effective at the level of useage. The input of the specialists have been helpful to encourage further cooperation. The High School Principals Committee developed several recommended forms of cooperation for 1980-81 school year.

These plans include:

1. Health Occupations - periods 1, 2, 5 and 6 at School C. Students from School B, School C and School D go to the Vocation Center at School C.
2. Building Trades - periods 1 and 2 at School C. Students from School A, School B and School C go to the Vocational Center at School C.

3. Auto Mechanics - periods 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 at School C. Students from School A, School B, and School C go to the Vocational Center at School C.
4. Physics - period 2 at School C with School A teacher. Students from School A, School B, School C and School D go to School A.
5. Chemistry - period 1 at School C with School A teachers. Students from School A, School B, School C and School D go to School C.
6. Home Economics - School C and School D share teacher ½ time each. School A and School B share a teacher 3/7 and 4/7 respectively.
7. Agriculture - School B sends teacher to School D for one period. School A and School C continue their current program.
8. Analysis - School A has its own class. School B, School C and School D go to School C for class period 1, with School C teacher
9. Spanish - School C and School D go to School D for class period 1 with School B teacher. School A and School B go to School B, period (TBA), with School B teacher
10. German - all schools go to School A
11. Psychology - School A, School B and School D will have the class in their own schools. School C will share their students with one of the other three schools, place and time to be arranged.

The importance of this early effort to cooperate between the four schools does provide encouragement to small schools. The cooperative programming will yield broader program offering, as illustrated above, with an opportunity to control the cost.

SUMMARY

The process of reviewing the experiences and suggestions of others aided these four school districts. They were able to abstract and adapt ideas from others into their own operational plan.

The model or plan they developed has helped the four schools to discuss problems and issues openly with each other. More importantly, the process will aid them in retaining some aspects of local school traditions, identity and provide improved educational opportunities to their high school age students. Moreover, this process will provide them with the experience to aid them to more cogently study educational programs, costs and the severe problems of providing comprehensive programs in a difficult period of time. The difficulties these schools face are projected declining enrollments, increased costs,

unfavorable funding formulae, continuing state mandates without funding, problems with certification, and rigid negotiated contracts.

This model is offered to the educational community as one means to solve problems. It is especially appropriate for small and rural schools.

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